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ABSTRACT

The process of program initiation and the use and communication of new information and practices of public alternative schools or programs in the New England area were examined. Four research questions were pursued in the study. An ex post facto research methodology, employing mailed questionnaires and personal interviews, was used. The study population included all public alternative schools located within the six New England states, or 67 schools. Information about public alternative school characteristics and operations was obtained; this information may help account for both the rapid proliferation of the concept and its institutionalization. (Author)

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A STUDY OF DIFFUSION PRACTICES OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS LOCATED IN NEW ENGLAND

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Objectives and Theoretical Framework

This study examined the process of program initiation and the use and communication of new information and practices of public alternative schools in New England. Four research concerns were pursued. First, can common patterns be discerned which account for the initiation of public alternative schools in New England? Second, how is new information obtained which can be used to influence alternative school programs? Third, how do public alternative school faculties communicate information about their school operations to others? And fourth, does the importance of general information sources utilized by educators vary markedly when they assume leadership responsibilities within public alternative schools?

Many educators point to the alternative school "movement" as one of the dynamic areas of innovation within the field. Yet, little exists in the literature to account for sources of these schools, how they spread, and how they engage in self-renewal. Case studies and census-type surveys have provided most of what is known about these schools. To date, no research has been reported which addresses concerns like the four raised above.

Methods and Techniques

An ex post facto research methodology, employing mailed questionnaires and personal interviews, was expedited. Given a set of alternative schools, efforts were made to describe operations and to ascertain communication patterns within each school and also across schools.

Dependent variables of importance included existing alternative school operations, current information utilization practices of staff employed by these schools, and current information communication practices adhered to by staff employed by these schools, Independent variables included antecedent events responsible for each school establishment, for information utilization behavior, and for information communication behavior. Data analyses were aimed at defining parameters of variables identified and at suggesting relationships among variables. Descriptive statistical techniques were utilized to treat the data.

Both survey instruments--the questionnaires and the interview inventory--were pilot tested and revised prior to actual implementation. Both were also critiqued by research specialists prior to use. Data obtained from the application of these instruments were coded and processed using the Cyber 74 SPSS, a software package capable of processing up to forty-seven variables, to discern relationships among variables of interest.

Data Sources

The study population included all public alternative schools located within the six New England states, or sixty-seven schools. Questionnaires were returned by eighty-five percent of these school sites. From these responses, fifteen persons identified as initiators of public alternative schools were randomly selected and interviewed in the setting of their practice.

Results and Conclusions

Demographic data gleaned from the questionnaire used is presented initially in order to describe public alternative school operations in New England; to identify sources utilized by alternative school staffs when seeking new information about alternative education; to describe methods used by public alternative school staffs to communicate information about alternative education to others; and, to indicate changes in the importance of general information sources mentioned by directors of public alternative schools prior to and after involvement with alternative education. Information obtained during face-to-face interviews with a random sample of alternative school directors were then combined with the demographic data for the purpose of addressing the four research questions previously-mentioned.

Demographic Data Patterns

Data were gathered and summarized for eight characteristics of alternative schools: (1) years of alternative school director' experience in alternative education (Table I); (2) age of alternative school (Table II); (3) size of alternative school enrollment (Table III); (4) student selection procedures (Table IV); (5) organizational structure of alternative schools (Table V); (6) annual per-pupil expenditure (Table VI); (7) predominant socio-economic classification of students enrolled (Table VII); and, (8) predominant geographic location of students. These data are summarized in chart form on the following pages.

A composite portrait of public alternative schools located in New England, based upon these data, suggests (1) alternative school directors have been involved in alternative education for about five years; (2) the typical alternative school has been operating for four and one-half years; (3) nearly two-thirds of these schools enroll 100 or fewer students; (4) enrollment is voluntary in more than four-fifths of these schools; (5) most alternative schools are established to serve secondary level students; (6) per-pupil expenditures of $1200 or less characterizes the annual budget of slightly more than half of the schools; (7) students from low and middle socio-economic areas constitute most of the school enrollment; and (8) students are drawn from suburban and urban communities primarily.

Sources utilized by alternative school staffs when seeking new information about alternative education include: (1) New Schools Exchange, Arkansas: (2) Center for New Schools, Chicago; (3) Consortium for Options in Public Education, Indiana University; (4) National Alternative Schools Program, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; (5) state education associations; (6) local school districts; (7) National Education Association; (8) American Federation of Teachers; (9) regional networks of alternative schools; (10) philanthropic organizations; and (11) various universities. Table IX summarized the external organizations used by alternative school staffs and the frequency of use over the past year. Only two sources of information are highlighted, namely, local school districts and the National Alternative Schools Program.

Communication modus operandi utilized by alternative school staffs include: (1) workshops and institutes; (2) meetings of local, regional, state, and national groups; (3) printed materials; (4) media other than printed material; (5) demonstrations; (6) individual consultation; (7) opportunities for formal training; (8) opportunities for informal training; and (9) speakers bureau services. Table X summarized communication modus operandi utilized and the frequency of their usage over the past year. Perhaps the word "diversity" best captures the essence of alternative school staffs' enterprise.

TABLE I: YEARS OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL DIRECTORS' EXPERIENCE IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Number of Years	Number of Directors	Per Cent
1	2	4.2
2	5	10.4
3	7	14.6
4	9	18.8
5	7	14.6
6	8	16.7
7	6	12.5
8	2	4.2
9	2	4.2
TOTAL	48	100.0

MEAN = 4.75 Years

TABLE II: AGE OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

Number of Years	Number of Schools	Per Cent
1	2	4.2
2	7	14.6
3	7	14.6
4	7	14.6
5	14	29.2
6	3	6.3
7	6	12.5
9	2	4.2
TOTAL	48	100.0

MEAN = 4.44 Years

TABLE III: SIZE OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Number of Students	Number of Schools	Per Cent
0 - 50	13	27.7
51 - 100	16	34.0
101 - 150	3	6.4
151 - 200	7	14.9
201 - 250	1	2.1
251 - 300	1	2.1
301 - 350	1	2.1
351 - 400	2	4.3
401 or More	3	6.4
TOTAL	47	100.0

TABLE IV: STUDENT SELECTION PROCEDURES

Selection Method	Number of Schools	Per Cent
Assigned	3	6.2
Volunteer	39	81.3
Both	6	12.5
TOTAL	48	100.0

TABLE V: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Grade Level	Number of Schools	Per Cent
Elementary	8	16.7
Junior High	4	8.3
High School	33	68.8
Junior & High School	2	4.2
Kindergarten to High	1	2.1
TOTAL	48	100.0

TABLE VI: ANNUAL PER-PUPIL EXPENDITURE

Per-Pupil Expenditure	Number of Schools	Frequency (Per Cent)
$ 800 or Less	7	15.2
$ 801 to 1000	9	19.6
$1001 to 1200	8	17.4
$1201 to 1400	9	19.6
$1401 to 1600	7	15.2
$1601 to 1800	3	6.5
$1801 to 2000	3	6.5
TOTAL	46	100.0

TABLE VII: PREDOMINANT SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS ENROLLED

Predominant Category	Number of Schools	Per Cent
Low	19	42.2
Low Mid	2	4.4
Mid	21	46.7
Mid Up	1	2.2
Up	1	2.2
Equal	1	2.2
TOTAL	45	100.0

TABLE VIII: PREDOMINANT GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION OF STUDENTS

Predominant Location	Number of Schools	Per Cent
Rural	3	6.4
Rur Sub	1	2.1
Suburban	22	46.8
Sub Urb	2	4.3
Urban	19	40.4
TOTAL	47	100.0

TABLE IX: IDENTIFICATION OF EXTERNAL ORGANIZATIONS USED BY ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STAFF AND FREQUENCY OF USE OVER THE PAST YEAR

Organization	Never	%	Once	%	2-4 Times	%	5 or More Times	%	Total Schs in Study	% of Schools
New Schools Exchange	39	81.3	1	2.1	8	16.7	0	0.0	48	100.0
Center for New Schools	37	77.1	6	12.5	5	10.4	0	0.0	48	100.0
Consortium for Options	35	72.9	7	14.6	4	8.3	2	4.2	48	100.0
National Alternative Schools Program	11	22.9	6	12.5	19	39.6	12	25.0	48	100.0
State Education Association	33	68.8	6	12.5	7	14.6	2	4.2	48	100.0
Local School District	22	45.8	3	6.3	8	16.7	15	31.3	48	100.0
National Education Association	39	81.3	5	10.4	3	6.3	1	2.1	48	100.0
American Federation of Teachers	44	91.7	1	2.1	2	4.2	1	2.1	48	100.0
Regional Network of Alternative Schools	36	75.0	3	6.3	8	16.7	1	2.1	48	100.0
Philanthropic	42	87.5	1	2.1	1	2.1	4	8.3	48	100.0
University	24	50.0	0	0.0	5	10.4	19	39.6	48	100.0

TABLE X: COMMUNICATION MODUS OPERANDI UTILIZED BY ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STAFFS AND FREQUENCY OF USE OVER THE PAST YEAR

Diffusion Strategy	Never	%	Once	%	2-4 Times	%	5 or More Times	%	Total Schs in Study	% of Schools
Provide Workshops and Institutes	14	29.2	8	16.7	15	31.3	11	29.9	48	100.0
Provide programs or speakers at meetings of local, state, regional, or national groups	17	35.4	2	4.2	14	29.2	15	31.3	48	100.0
Publish and send Printed Matter to Others	8	16.7	2	4.2	5	10.4	33	68.8	48	100.0
Provide Media Other Than Printed Matter for Others	17	35.4	5	10.4	17	35.4	9	18.8	48	100.0
Act as an Education Demonstration	6	12.5	1	2.1	4	8.3	37	77.1	48	100.0
Provide Consultant Help	15	31.3	4	8.3	9	18.8	20	41.7	48	100.0
Provide Formal Training	20	41.7	2	4.2	7	14.6	19	39.6	48	100.0
Provide Informal Gatherings	12	25.0	5	10.4	16	33.3	15	31.3	48	100.0
Provide Speakers to Informal or Formal Groups	18	37.5	1	2.1	12	25.0	17	35.4	48	100.0

The directors of public alternative schools mentioned numerous sources used to obtain educational information. Table XI contrasts sources used prior to and after involvement with alternative education. The single most important source of information mentioned both prior to and following involvement with alternative education was printed matter. Workshops and institutes, informal gatherings, and - to a lesser extent - formal training, were also prominent sources of information. Meetings of local, regional, state and national groups, and, middle management personnel were mentioned least frequently. Most apparent changes in importance involved media other than printed matter (more), educational demonstration (more), the various meetings previously-mentioned (more), and formal training (less).

The Four Research Questions

Each of the four research concerns is again posed in this section. Implications of data obtained via the questionnaire and interview techniques follow each question.

Concern One. Can common patterns be discerned which account for the initiation of public alternative schools in New England?

Public alternative schools are "grass-roots" ventures initiated by members within rather than from outside communities. Teacher, parent, and student involvment during the initiation stages seemed to be critical during the beginning phases. Schools initiated typically serve the same student population as conventional schools in the various communities. Unfortunately, no particular pattern of historical factors emerged which accounted for the initiation of public alternative schools in New England.

Other school staffs, central administrators, and school boards typically offered positive support for alternative school programs. Community support was positive; however, it was not as reinforcing as the groups previously cited. Support from parents in a given community varied; however, enrolled students' parents and the students themselves constituted a strong positive force. Such support seemed justified, as most of the schools positively influenced their communities. (Some even exerted influence upon conventional school practices).

Personal experiences and reading choices of individuals seemed related to the initiation of public alternative schools; however, specifics were unclear. A majority of initiators lived or worked in communities embarking upon such a school for many years, and they were actively involved in community affairs. During the early phase of evolving such schools, initiators changed roles frequently. Most delegated operational responsibilities readily to colleagues, and most assumed lower leadership profiles in their schools. Most also experienced substantial changes in thinking about school operations, which often resulted in increased instructional options, more instructional standards and more explicit program definitions.

All schools surveyed were initiated by one individual or a small core group comprised of teachers, students, or parents. School personnel usually serve as the prime initiator. Once a core group of interested persons was established, a series of meetings was initiated. Out of these meetings emerges the initiative for support from diverse community groups, the form of the school itself, programs to be offered by the school, and so forth. Either parents or students were involved in this planning process for all schools studied. Planners most prominent problems during this stage were related to resistance to change by community members and to community members' conceptions of alternative schools.

TABLE XI: IMPORTANCE OF GENERAL INFORMATION SOURCES MENTIONED BY DIRECTORS OF PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS PRIOR TO AND AFTER INVOLVEMENT WITH ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

SOURCES	BEFORE		AFTER		NEVER	
	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%
Workshops and Institutes	26	54.5	30	62.5	11	22.9
Meetings of Local, State, Regional, or National Grps	7	14.6	13	27.1	32	66.7
Printed Matter	33	68.8	33	68.8	8	16.7
Media Other Than Printed Matter	11	22.9	20	41.6	27	56.3
Educational Demonstration	13	27.1	19	39.6	25	52.1
Consultant	12	25.0	14	29.2	28	58.3
Formal Training	22	45.8	15	31.3	19	39.6
Middle Management Positions	11	22.9	10	20.8	31	64.6
Informal Gatherings	22	45.8	20	41.6	22	45.8
Other	16	33.3	14	29.1	28	58.3

(N) = Number of Directors

% = Percentage of Total Number of Directors

Strangely, during the period of planning and initiating alternative schools studied, little assistance was sought from or provided by sources outside the community.

Concern Two. How is new information obtained which can be used to influence alternative school programs?

More than seventy per cent of the schools studied experienced major changes in the past two years. These changes were initiated by administrators typically; however, teachers and students often were involved in launching changes. The majority of changes reported can be divided into five categories: (1) curriculum changes; (2) governance changes; (3) scheduling procedures changes; (4) admittance or selection process changes; and, (5) expansion changes. Public alternative schools in New England experienced changes regardless of the age of the school.

Local resources are drawn upon for information much more emphatically than resources external to a given community initiating an alternative school (see Table IX). When sources external to a community are cited, they usually include the National Alternative Schools Program (NASP), certain universities, and the New Schools Exchange. Neither state education agencies nor national teacher organizations (NEA and AFT) served as important sources of information.

Concern Three. How do public alternative school faculties communicate information about their school operations to others?

Public alternative school faculties actively engage in the communication of their work to others. Table X depicts the range and frequency of communication modus operandi utilized. Educational demonstration and preparation of printed material for distribution seemed to be preferred most often. Offering formal training seemed to be least popular.

When characteristics of public alternative schools are related to communication modus operandi reported, the following patterns emerge.

1. All age levels of schools displayed active communication; however, schools above the average age of four and one-half years exhibited higher levels of diffusion activity.

2. All sizes of schools displayed high levels of communication,

3. High Schools utilized workshops and institutes, and formal training least as communication strategies; however, they were active in other categories; elementary schools were active in all categories of communication.

4. Schools for predominantly low and for predominantly middle class students were active across all levels except two (providing informal gatherings for others and acting as educational demonstrations). Schools for predominantly low socio-economic students preferred informal gatherings. Schools for predominantly middle scoio-economic students utilized educational demonstrations more frequently.

5. Predominantly urban schools were more active than predominantly suburban schools in communicating their innovation to others.

6. Schools with the lowest annual per-pupil expenditure exhibited less communication activity in providing workshops and institutes, and providing consultants; schools at the $800 - $1000 level were active throughout all categories; otherwise, no other clear-cut patterns emerged.

Initiators mentioned four strategies often used by their staffs to communicate alternative school practices to others: open classroom visitations; preparing and mailing literature; conducting workshops; and writing newspaper articles. Parents and other educators were cited most frequently as the most important groups to whom school personnel communicated alternative school ideas.

Concern Four. Does the importance of general information sources utilized by educators vary markedly when they assume leadership responsibilities within public alternative schools?

Printed matter, as pointed out, seemed to be the most important source of information utilized by alternative school leaders both prior to their involvement with and after commitment to alternative education. Other information sources of value included workshops and institutes, informal gatherings, and - to a lesser extent - formal training. In-service training and information gatherings sponsored by the established educational institutions (for example, state education agencies) exerted little influence upon the behavior of alternative school leaders.

An analysis of directors' questionnaire and interview data to determine relationships between years of alternative school experience and sources of information utilized yielded little beyond what has already been reported. And, an in-depth analysis of interview data suggested the behavior of directors has been influenced most profoundly by their recognition of the inappropriateness of conventional school practices, by books read, and by involvement with other alternative school personnel.

Implications of Data

Whether data reported accounts for some aspects of the proliferation of public alternative schools in New England is subject to question. Data obtained suggests alternate schools are localized operations, community schools in the best sense of that concept, and small in enrollment. School leaders do not rely upon established educational agencies for much assistance, and school leaders have somehow managed to establish and maintain an "invisible college" among themselves. What causes a school to spring up and flourish in community A, but not in community B, can only be inferred from information offered.

Demographic data obtained offer bench-marks for persons aspiring to initiate alternative schools, which is more information than these persons might have obtained previously. The data highlight sources of information routinely utilized by alternative school directors. And, the data indicate channels of communication selected by directors to spread the word about alternative education. These data may prove to be a valuable foundation upon which to design subsequent studies of diffusion practices of alternative schools in New England.